

# BOSS *BOSS* Enterprises *Enterprises*



**O**n an overcast March morning, three employees of BOSS Enterprises stand in the rubble strewn courtyard of a Lake Merritt apartment complex debating the fate of Sophia's knee, and, by implication, the fate of Sophia.

For the past several days the knee has been slipping in and out of its socket. Sophia, one of three carpentry apprentices in BOSS's tiny construction company, says it doesn't really bother

her. But the pops are loud and frequent enough to worry Tara Anderson, the lead carpenter at the work site. She and Nancy Hoeffler, BOSS Enterprise's finance manager, stare at Sophia's paint and mud-stained dungarees and fret. They think she should have some sort of surgery to correct the problem. Even though it is a cool day, Sophia's arms are bare and powdered with crumbled stucco. She crosses them against her sturdy torso and shakes her head no. Surgery

would mean months on disability, months of lost momentum.

Sophia, who is in her early 20's, is afraid of blowing another chance. Nearly a year ago, she graduated from Asian Neighborhood Design's Oakland carpentry program but she failed to find a job. Her left eye is milky as if somehow it slipped in its socket and the dark brown iris is a dim gray gleam on the flip side of the eyeball. Sophia, who receives public assistance and lives in BOSS transitional housing, said that after she left the AND program, she spent the next several months partying until she was stir-crazy and eager to work. Although she was happy with the skills she learned at AND, Sophia, who has been on public assistance all of her life, wasn't mentally ready to work. At BOSS Enterprises there is a structure and a purpose to her days. And she likes working with Anderson, a jovial twenty-something tomboy who is on the verge of wrecking her own knees with a constant regimen of soccer, basketball and snowboarding. They are an amiable odd couple, the skinny white supervisor with a puppy's energy and the soft-spoken black trainee with the hungry mind of a good student.

"At AND I learned the new carpentry – building and framing from the ground up,"

beneath the decks and under the stucco walls of several apartment units. She will take a long and tedious bus ride to Highland Hospital and hope that her doctor doesn't ask her to return for many physical therapy sessions.

Riding from the job site back to BOSS Enterprise's office at the edge of Berkeley's busy Fourth Street shopping district, Hoeffler, 34, muses over Sophia's determination.

"Sophia's concern is succeeding," she said. "We want her to succeed but should her success be in construction? With that leg, will she be able to work in construction in five years?"

Hoeffler quit a \$60,000 a year job with a silver recycling company to work for the struggling construction firm. She took a pay cut and came to BOSS because she wanted to worry about situations like this: should BOSS get Sophia a leg brace and a physical therapist and support her in her dream of becoming a construction worker? Or should they help her find work – perhaps in cabinetry or a machine shop – which would be easier on her knees?

"I want her to own her success," Hoeffler said. "If this won't be part of her lifelong journey, I don't want her to feel like a failure."

If Sophia's knee gives out, only one BOSS trainee will be left on the job. Another partic-

ipant has been out for several days with a torn ligament in his elbow. Although the remaining trainee and two master carpenters can manage the handful of small construction jobs BOSS Enterprises has on the books, the

company's fate as a social purpose enterprise is as shaky as Sophia's knee.

"We're not sure we're going to make it," said boona cheema, executive director of BOSS (Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency), the firm's parent agency. "I'm not convinced that if we want to move people out of poverty that profitability will be attainable in the time frame that businesses are supposed to become profitable."

BOSS, which began nearly 30 years ago as a one-room street outreach program for men-

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Sophia said. "I like working with my hands. Here, I learn more, working on different sites and taking things apart and putting them back together. We tore down a garage port and rebuilt it, hung sheet rock and did the seismic upgrade."

Sophia says her doctor has already told her that surgery wouldn't do her any good, that all she needs is physical therapy to strengthen the muscles around the knee. In a few hours she will leave the courtyard, where she and Anderson are replacing the rotted wood

tally ill and disabled homeless people, provides economic development, housing, support services and community building for residents of Alameda County.

“Our mission has never changed: to end poverty and homelessness,” cheema said. “That’s the glue that holds us together.”

Over the years BOSS has been intimately involved in establishing programs and services to meet the changing needs of the poor. In the mid-1970’s that meant setting up shelters for single women and children. In the 1980’s it meant creating supportive housing for people with HIV. Today it means helping people earn a living wage.

But programming is only part of BOSS’s mandate. “We’re not comfortable just doing social service,” cheema said. “We’re out there organizing and advocating and doing policy work. We’re putting street heat on folks. BOSS is not just about creating housing or jobs. It’s about creating lasting social change.”

BOSS decided to start a construction company because it seemed like a good way to train people for high-paying jobs in the building trades.

“I know the struggles our families go through trying to live on \$20,000 a year,” cheema said. “We were trying to move people into the \$15 to \$20 an hour range. What we are finding is that people will get those skills and get into the higher end jobs but it’s going to take more than a few months. It’s going to take one or even two years before our participants are ready for that.”

In the three years since BOSS partnered with the Roberts Enterprise Development Fund to establish the construction company, the enterprise is on its second general manager. The company nearly went under when the last GM underbid a contract to renovate a medium-sized motel in San Francisco. The GM didn’t consider the trouble workers without cars would have getting from the East Bay to a job site in San Francisco. He didn’t factor in the learning curve for carpentry apprentices who were training on the job. The project ended up costing BOSS Enterprises \$11,000. When the GM left, he took his lead carpenter and his business contacts with him.

For a while, cheema and Winston Burton, BOSS’s economic development director, were managing the company themselves.

“It’s hard to find an excellent contractor who also knows how to manage an organization,” cheema says. “I didn’t realize how much of my time and energy was going to go into learning the business. Give me a break. I don’t want to wear a hard hat.”

Her dream was that BOSS Enterprises would follow the BOSS model: the program participants would become so skilled that



eventually they would be able to take over and run the company.

“There’s a real class issue in most organizations between staff and non-staff,” she said. “Our staff reflects those we serve: 60 percent have come out of poverty and homelessness. We’ve been able to do effective work with the people who usually never get a voice in the decision making.”

Out of 148 full-time employees, cheema said she could count the number of workers with advanced degrees on one hand. The BOSS workforce reflects a diversity of class and race and gender and sexual orientation and age and ability or disability.

“We really do think of ourselves as a community of people,” she said. “We are very open, very inclusionary. Our belief in people’s capacity to rise to the occasion and give back has paid off in the long run.”

### boona cheema

cheema, 54, is a small, intense and extravagantly lovely woman. The lavender liner that encircles her dark eyes, the bits of Indian gold and honey amber on her face and hands don't seem like ornaments but organic extensions of her beauty, like the tendrils that curl from a vine. She designed the elaborate tattoo that bracelets her right wrist; directly over the pulse point is a two-inch long red AIDS ribbon. "I want to be beautiful and political too," she laughed, looking at the design. She is perhaps BOSS's best example of someone rising from poverty to leadership.

She first came to BOSS, in 1971, as a welfare client, the wife of an impoverished student and seven and a half months pregnant with their son. Recently, she came across a \$200 a month pay stub from her first BOSS job — working as a street outreach counselor. Since then, she's been a shelter counselor, a shelter cook and coordinator of BOSS's multi-service center.

cheema said BOSS's board had a hard time deciding to trust her with the executive director's job — her predecessor was an attor-

ney. cheema, who has masters degrees in divinity and journalism and worked as a reporter in her native India, didn't have the right sort of credentials for the job but eventually the board decided to take a chance on her. She said she was glad the board struggled through the decision to hire her — someone who was not the obvious candidate but was grounded in the agency's work — because it prepared them to promote others from the communities BOSS serves.

During the 21 years she has piloted BOSS, the agency has grown from an annual budget of \$260,000 to \$7 million. The BOSS portfolio includes 24 sites and 130 funding streams.

"I've grown into the job," she said. "I did not come with a set of skills that could be applied to management. I was clueless."

Her own experience has helped BOSS foster a culture that gives people room to rise.

"You have to commit the resources and the time and the patience to grow somebody to a level of responsibility," she said. "You can't fire them the first time they relapse. It's about accommodation. You've got to accommodate growth."



### Nancy Jordan

She looks to Nancy Jordan, director of BOSS's housing program for people with HIV and AIDS, as an example of what can happen when an organization is willing to grow with the people it serves.

Jordan was nearly 50 and living in BOSS transitional housing for homeless women when her caseworker recommended her for a job as a shift worker in a BOSS shelter. Eleven years later, besides managing BOSS's four homes for people with AIDS, she is also a member of an Alameda County collaborative that oversees \$2.1 million in federal funding for youth and another collaborative designing case management for low income residents on the former Alameda military base.

"I get the biggest pleasure now in getting people into per-

manent housing and helping them find work,” said Jordan, who designed the HIV-AIDS housing programs. “This is not a job. BOSS is not about a paycheck. You have to really care about people’s futures to do this.”

Not long before BOSS hired Jordan, she had been an alcoholic speed freak living on the streets of Hayward and Fremont. She traveled a long way from her upper middle-class Catholic roots in Pennsylvania’s Main Line to sleeping in construction sites and stealing to feed a \$140 a day speed habit. Even though she loved her family, she left home at 19, following her older sister to San Francisco. She’d hoped to find a place where she could be comfortable being a lesbian; instead she fell in with a dangerous and destructive crowd. She lost touch with her family for three years. She was even arrested for felony armed robbery. “I was the driver,” she said.

On her 47th birthday she entered Orchid House in Oakland, a residential treatment program for female addicts. When she graduated from that program, she found housing through BOSS.

“I don’t know why I decided to quit using,” Jordan said. “You do get tired. I know there’s no way I could live like that, the age I am now. I’d be too scared.”

If Jordan was to turn in her jeans and Cal sweatshirt for Pendleton slacks and a twin set, she could easily pass for a society matron. At 60, her face is cracked and creased from years of exposure but her good bones endure. There was a time when she was obsessed with

all the years she’d wasted being wasted but she’s coming to peace with that.

“When I started working at the shelter, I realized that I got clean and sober so that I could make a difference in other people’s lives,” she said. “And I can see that I have been able to make a difference. You’ve got to count your blessings. I didn’t die. I wasn’t found on the street with a needle in my arm. I didn’t kill anybody. I managed to get back into my family and become an active member of my family. I have a good job. And I’ve never been healthier in my life.”

cheema said it would be practically impossible for a woman nearing retirement age to begin a career in management and advance to the level of responsibility Jordan holds. But the program design, policy development and high level administrative skills Jordan has developed at BOSS are readily applicable to executive positions in the for-profit sector. cheema’s dream is that one day BOSS would be able to create jobs for others like Jordan — and turn a profit.

“Our hope for the enterprise was to do something that would get people higher paying jobs and allow them to grow to the top just as they do in BOSS,” cheema said. “When we opened the first shelter, we had to figure it out. Same with a business venture. My son tells me it isn’t rocket science but some days it feels like that. I want to get to that ‘phew!’ period. Getting to where we can say, ‘Yes, we’re on our way’ takes longer than anyone thought.”